

PreventionAlert

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What's Down with Marijuana? (I)

What has the latest research shown us about marijuana? Among other things, marijuana has now been linked to violent teen behavior, may be responsible for youth tongue cancer, and has been shown in weekly users to trigger suicidal depression. For those with a disposition toward other serious mental illness, marijuana has been found to unleash it.

Marijuana usage up somewhat

In 2001, marijuana usage ticked up slightly for high school juniors and seniors (ages 16 to 17)—14.9 percent smoked it in the past month (up from 13.2 percent in 1999). Among freshman and sophomores (14- and 15-year-olds), there was a similar small increase, from 6.9 percent in 2000 to 7.6 percent in 2001. About 12 percent of past year marijuana users over 12 smoke it almost daily (over 300 days), or 2.5 million persons. Close to 40 percent of marijuana users, however, smoke it less than 12 days a year.

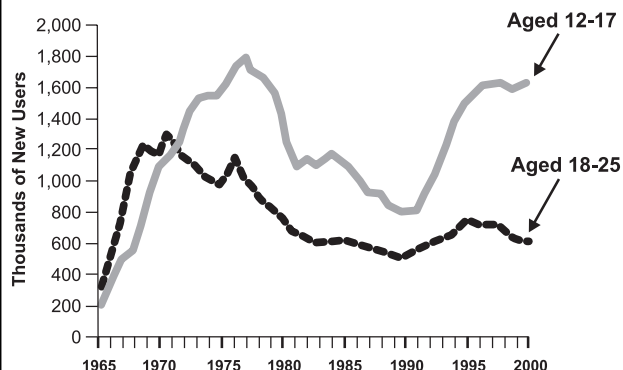
The myth among youth is that “everyone is doing it.” In fact, the majority is not—51 percent of high school seniors have never tried marijuana once. However, 22 percent of seniors are “current” (past month) users of marijuana. The hard-core, or daily marijuana users (20 or more times in the past 30 days) remain a small portion of youth: 5.8 percent of seniors, 4.5 percent of sophomores, and 1.3 percent of eighth graders.

New use and historical patterns

There have been ebbs and flows in use of marijuana over the past 40 years. About 2.4 million Americans tried marijuana for the first time in 2000. This was a substantial increase from 600,000 new users in 1965. However, initiation in the marijuana world peaked in 1976-1977, at 3.2 million, and dipped to its lowest figure in decades at 1.4 million in 1990. New users rose from there until hitting 2.5 million in 1996, where it has remained for half a decade.

Marijuana has been on the American scene for at least a century. In 1906, it was proscribed under the Pure Food and Drug Act. In 1914, Utah was the first state to pass anti-marijuana legislation; by 1931, 29 states had prohibited the medical use of marijuana. In 1936, the government film, “Reefer Madness” was released; it is still a cult film. In 1970, the Federal Government eliminated mandatory sentencing for possession of small amounts of marijuana. The peak year for teen use of marijuana was 1979. In 1985, synthetic THC, or Merinol, was produced to relieve the

Figure 5.1 Annual Numbers of New Users of Marijuana 1965–2000



nausea of cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy. In 2001, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously voted down medical marijuana laws. That same year, the #1 rap song “Because I Got High” by Afroman spoke about the destructive effects of marijuana.

Recent research and trends

- Marijuana is increasingly a delivery medium for stronger psychoactive drugs. Joints laced with crack cocaine are called fireweed. PCP, an extremely dangerous hallucinogen, has been found in marijuana joints in Dallas, New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and other cities.
- White or red patches in the mouth of a marijuana smoker may indicate oral or tongue, cancer. About half the people who get tongue cancer die within five years. Incidence of tongue cancer among people under 40 has gone up over 60 percent in the past two decades. Marijuana use by the young is suspected by researchers to be a source of these trends. One marijuana joint is as potent with cancer-agents—including carbon monoxide—as five tobacco cigarettes.
- Among illicit drugs, only cocaine will land a person in the emergency room more often than marijuana—29 percent of episodes involve cocaine vs. 16 percent with marijuana.

Sources: www.forreal.org; *A Summary of Findings from the 2001 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse*, SAMHSA, 2002; *Overview of the Key Findings, Monitoring the Future 2001*, National Institutes of Health, 2002; *Marijuana, Substance Abuse Resource Guide*, SAMHSA, 2000; *Emergency Department Trends from the DAWN, Preliminary Estimates*, 2001, SAMHSA, Office of Applied Studies, 2002; *Marijuana: Weeding Out the Hype!*, SAMHSA, 2002.

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